DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 911 RC 019 140

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TITLE	Hispanics in Higher Education: Trends in Participation. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-RC-93-5
PUB DATE	Mar 93
CONTRACT	RI88062016
NOTE	3p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC/CRESS, Appalachia Educational Laboratory, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325 (free).
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	College Graduates; *College Students; *Degrees (Academic); *Educational Attainment; *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Enrollment; Enrollment Rate; *Enrollment Trends; Higher Education; *Hispanic Americans; Young Adults
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; Hispanic American Students

ABSTRACT

Although participation of Hispanic-Americans in higher education is growing, the Hispanic share of participation (enrollment and degrees) is still far less than the Hispanic share of the U.S. population. Indeed, the college enrollment rate among Hispanics aged 18-24 declined to 16.2 percent in 1990 from a high of 20.4 percent in 1975. During the same period, the college enrollment rate among all non-Hispanic Whites in the same age group increased to 36.8 percent from 27.4 percent. Improving the level of educational attainment among Hispanics will require attention to the K-12 experience. These efforts must focus not only on increasing the high school graduation rate among Hispanics, but also on improving the quality of Hispanic students' K-12 experiences. From 1980 to 1990, the Hispanic share of total enrollment and share of total degrees conferred increased for 2-year programs, 4-year programs, graduate programs, and professional schools. Educational, economic, and social factors contributing to the underrepresentation of Hispanics in higher education are outlined. Recommendations for improving Hispanic participation in higher education are offered to teachers and school-district, college, and university administrators. (SV)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools March 1993

Hispanics in Higher Education: Trends in Participation

by Jaime Chahin

Digest EDO-RC-93-5

THIS DIGEST CONSIDERS trends in the participation of Hispanics in higher education from 1980 to 1990. Educators at all levels (including elementary and secondary schools) need to understand the circumstances of improved educational attainment among members of this increasingly influential population.

The Digest first examines participation rates in overall demographic context and then examines the importance of the K-12 experience. Then it considers trends in enrollment and degree completion. The discussion concludes by drawing implications from the data and recommending measures to help improve related practice in both K-12 and higher education.

College participation rates in demographic context

The college participation rate is the most important indicator of the status of Hispanics in higher education. This Digest considers participation in terms of current enrollments and degrees awarded. The discussion illustrates trends, in most cases, by comparing 1979 or 1980 data with 1990 data. Two sorts of participation rates are considered: (1) changes in absolute numbers and (2) changes in the share of Hispanic participation. By both measures, as the analysis will show, Hispanic participation is improving markedly.

Interpretation of these data, however, requires some consideration of overall demographic context. Although participation is growing, the Hispanic share of participation (enrollment and degrees) is still far less than the Hispanic share of the general population. Indeed, evidence suggests that the proportion of all Hispanic youth attending college has *declined*. The total number of Hispanic college-aged youth (those aged 18 to 24 years) increased by 35.2 percent between 1980 and 1990 (Garcia & Montgomery, 1991). Nonetheless, the enrollment of this cohort in higher education *declined* to 16.2 percent in 1990, down from its 1975 high of 20.4 percent (Snyder & Hoffman, 1992, Table 173; cf. Carter & Wilson, 1992). The trend among all non-Hispanic whites in this cohort is quite different—an increase to 36.8 percent in 1990 from 27.4 percent in 1975.

The Importance of the K-12 experience

Rendon and Nora (1988) note that improving the level of educational attainment among Hispanics requires attention to the K-12 experience. Improvement will most fundamentally require sustained efforts to increase the high school graduation rate, though this increase is not sufficient in itself.

In 1991, 183,740 Hispanics graduated from high school, an increase of 31.2 percent over the 1985 figure (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 1991). In some parts of the nation, particularly the South and West, increases of up to 65 percent by 1995 are likely (Carter & Wilson, 1992). The commission projects that Hispanics will account for nine percent of all high school graduates by 1995. These figures could represent low estimates, however, if the rate of high school completion among Hispanics increases from the previous 10-year average (among the lowest for all ethnic and racial groups) of 57.4 percent (Carter & Wilson, 1992).

In 1975, 30.1 percent of Hispanic high school graduates enrolled in higher education, as compared to 31.3 percent of white non-Hispanics. In 1991—the latest year for which data are available—28.2 percent of Hispanic high school graduates were enrolled in higher education, as compared to 41.0 percent of white, non-Hispanic high school graduates (Snyder & Hoffman, 1992, Table 173). Thus, Hispanics' high school graduation no longer appears to improve their chances of participation to the same extent as among white non-Hispanics.

Such observations mean that concern for the improved participation of Hispanics in higher education cannot be limited to college and university faculty and administration. It is a major challenge for K-12 educators as well. The challenge is not simply a matter of increasing the *rate* at which Hispanics graduate from high school: Improving the quality of students' K-12 experiences appears to be a key issue.

College enrollment

According to the U.S. Department of Education (Snyder & Hoffman, 1992, Tables 193 and 194), overall enrollment in higher education grew by about 13.4 percent (to 13,710,000 students nationwide) between 1980 and 1990. During the same time period, Hispanic enrollments in higher education grew by 60.7 percent, to about 758,000 students (or 5.5 percent of total college enrollment, as compared to 3.0 percent in 1980).

The overall trend, however, can be analyzed further by participation in different types of higher education programs. The focus, below, is on changes in the Hispanic *share of total enrollment* from 1980 to 1990 (all data from Snyder & Hoffman, 1992, Tables 193 and 194):

- two-year programs: 5.7 percent of total enrollment (1980), versus 8.1 percent (1990);
- four-year programs: 3.0 percent of total enrollment (1980), versus 4.2 percent (1990);
- graduate programs: 2.6 percent of total enrollment (1980), versus 3.2 percent (1990); and
- professional schools: 2.4 percent of total enrollment (1980), versus 3.9 percent (1990).

College degrees

Between 1979 and 1990, the number of degrees conferred by colleges and universities in the U.S. increased by about 12.5 percent (to 1,926,635). During this period, the number of degrees conferred on Hispanics increased by almost 50.9 percent (to 65,863, or 3.4 percent of the total, as compared to 2.5 percent of the total in 1979). In terms of the Hispanic share of degrees conferred, the overall trend breaks out by type of program as follows (Snyder & Hoffman, 1992, all data from Tables 246, 249, 252, 255, and 258):

- two-year programs: 4.1 percent of the total (1979), versus 4.9 percent (1990);
- four-year programs: 2.2 percent of the total (1979), versus 3.1 percent (1990);

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- graduate programs (masters level): 1.9 percent of the total (1979), versus 2.5 percent (1990);
- graduate programs (doctoral level): 1.3 percent of the total (1979), versus 2.1 percent (1990); and
- professional schools: 1.9 percent of the total (1979) versus 3.4 percent (1990).

Implications

The absolute number of Hispanics enrolled in and completing higher education increased substantially from 1980 to 1990 (up 60.7 and 50.9 percent, respectively). Share of enrollment and degree completion is another indicator of participation trends. Relative to *their 1980 share* of total enrollment, Hispanics increased their participation by about 80 percent in the last decade (3.0 percent to 5.5 percent). On the same basis, increases in the share of degrees actually completed by Hispanics (between 1979 and 1990) were more modest (about 36 percent), as the preceding data also show (2.5 percent to 3.4 percent). Degree completion, therefore, is a major concern.

Hispanics now comprise *nine percent* of the total U.S. population and about *12 percent* of the cohort aged 18-24. Seen in this light, the trend data also establish the fact that Hispanics have not participated in higher education in anything like their proportional representation in the general population.

If one accepts the proposition that all groups in society (e.g., ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups) *ought* to participate in higher education at rates equal to their presence in the general population, then Hispanics—like many other groups—are clearly "underrepresented" in higher education. Recent studies have cited several critical influences that might be responsible for this circumstance (Carter & Wilson, 1992; Holtzman, 1992; Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990; Rendon, 1992; Stamper & Reeves, 1985; Wilson & Melendez, 1985):

- inadequate preparation and elevated dropout rates among Hispanics at the secondary level;
- rising cost of postsecondary education, coupled with reduced levels of financial assistance for low-income students and families;
- concentration of Hispanics in poorly funded urban elementary and secondary schools; and
- low transfer rates from two-year to four-year programs and from four-year to graduate and professional programs.

Recommendations

A society that sought to include all citizens in meaningful and productive roles in both public and private life would cultivate the intellectual capacities of all students well. On this basis, fuller participation of Hispanics in higher education would seem to be important for the common good of the nation. The following recommendations relate to major points illuminated by the trend data:

- elementary school faculty should encourage high educational aspirations among Hispanic students from an early age (Hodgkinson, 1985);
- schools and districts should develop and implement effective plans to improve the high school completion rate of Hispanic students (QEM, 1990);
- high school faculty (including counseling and guidance staff) should challenge Hispanic students to undertake stronger academic programs (Carter & Wilson, 1992);
- schools and districts should provide more widely accessible information about college planning to Hispanic students and their families (Rendon, 1992);
- secondary schools, community colleges, and institutions with four-year degree programs should collaborate to recruit and retain Hispanic students for higher education programs (Rendon & Nora, 1988);
- community colleges and institutions with four-year programs should collaborate to facilitate the transfer of Hispanic students from two-year programs (Rendon & Nora, 1988); and
- higher education agencies should establish special programs—such as the New Jersey Academic Careers Program or the Rutgers Minority Advancement Program—to help enhance Hispanic participation in doctoral programs (see Clague, 1990, for details).

Educators need to recall Hodgkinson's (1985) assertion that our educational institutions—from elementary schools to universities—are "all one system." Though some progress is clearly evident, educators in both K-12 and college settings can take steps to cultivate Hispanics' fuller and more successful engagement in postsecondary studies.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, under contract no. RI-88-062016. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement or the Department of Education.

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